

Freeway, levee alignment raise concerns from Avondale officials

by **David Madrid** - Sept. 13, 2008 07:00 AM
The Arizona Republic

A levee under construction north of the Gila and Salt rivers that will protect more than 600 homes from flooding will likely be rerouted.

That proposed realignment alarms Avondale officials, who fear losing the southern route of the Arizona 801 freeway.

That southern route runs along the levee, but the new levee realignment places part of the 801 route inside an unprotected flood zone.

The Arizona Department of Transportation has assured Avondale that the levee realignment will not affect the freeway route decision, according to city officials.

"That was our initial concern when we saw that (levee realignment), but that was quickly addressed by ADOT," Assistant City Manager David Fitzhugh said. "They didn't feel it would be a problem."

The Avondale City Council unanimously opposes the northern Arizona 801 route,

which would run along Broadway Road, on the south. Council members say the northern alignment will divide Avondale and ruin the city's last master-planned community - the 13-square-mile Estrella Foothills in the city's planning area.

Freeway plans in early stages

ADOT spokesman Brock Barnhart said there are three alternatives for the 801 alignment: the southern and northern alignments and not building the freeway at all.

"At this time, it's essentially difficult for us, because we're still in the study or the environmental phase of the proposed 801, so really what we've done is, we're looking at the alternatives for the alignments," he said. "Within this phase of the process, we haven't gotten too much in detail with the actual design of the freeway."

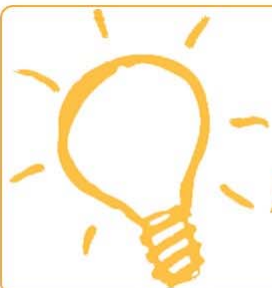
If the southern alignment is chosen, ADOT will address the issues of the flood plain and levee system, Barnhart said.

It is still early in the process with a 45-day public-comment period on the alignments about a year out, he said.

Levee construction problems

Fitzhugh said construction issues and land-acquisition costs significantly increased the

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levee project budget, triggering the need for the rerouting.

He said existing sand and gravel pits as well as the expense of purchasing private property caused the costs of the original levee alignment to skyrocket.

"The difference is \$16 to \$17 million vs. \$6 or \$7 million," Fitzhugh said.

Avondale Mayor Marie Lopez Rogers lamented the sand and gravel mining issues along the rivers.

"I think we continue to be frustrated by the permitting issues that happen along the river because there is no sunset to those right now," Rogers said.

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